The art of persuasion takes as much heart as head—maybe more. BY JAY HEINRICHS

MY DAUGHTER, Dorothy Junior, has quite a mouth on her. She doesn’t suffer fools gladly and has no compunction against pointing out her father’s foolishness. And she’s been getting away with back talk for longer than I’d care to admit.

ME: The early bird gets the worm.
D. JR.: The bird can have it.

ME: When the going gets tough, the tough get going.
D. JR.: Don’t let me stop you.

It’s too late to do anything about this sort of thing. Dorothy graduated from college this past May. She’s a sweet kid and the most loyal friend you could have. Just don’t say anything dumb or clichéd around her.

ME: A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.
D. JR.: Then you should be consistent.

Why did I let her get away with these verbal smackdowns all this time? Because she’s funny. She holds her own with her old man by making me
laugh. And therein lies a lesson for all of us, starting with me.

I grew up thinking that logic was the end-all and be-all of argument: Back up a flawless proposition with irrefutable facts, and you win! But over the years I gradually realized that logic takes you only so far. That’s because—think about it—most day-to-day arguments sound little like the formal debates during presidential campaigns. Besides, there’s a big difference between winning an argument and getting what you want. Sure, you may overwhelm your opponent with your bomb-proof arguments and unassailable facts (“As you can see by this pie chart, our family has 22 percent more fun at the beach than in the mountains, a prime argument for going to the shore this summer. Now let’s look at the financials…”). But to get people to do your bidding willingly, you have to bring other factors into play as well. And one of those factors, I’m both sorry and happy to say, is emotion.

Emotional argument surrounds us, whether we like it or not. I’m living proof. While researching a book about persuasion a couple of years ago, I conducted an experiment to see just how pervasive emotional argument was. I tried to fast from emotional rhetoric—including advertising, politics, family squabbles, or any psychological manipulation whatsoever—for an entire day. No one would manipulate me, and I would not manipulate anyone else. Heck, I wouldn’t even let myself manipulate myself. Nobody, not even I, would tell me what to do.

If anyone could pull off this experiment, I could. I worked for myself. Indeed, having temporarily dropped out of a career in journalism and publishing, I worked by myself, in a cabin a short distance from my house. My family lived in a tiny village in northern New England, a region that boasts the most persuasion-resistant humans on the planet. Advertisers have nightmares about my lifestyle: no TV, no cell phone, no BlackBerry, no dial-up Internet. I was media-free, a hermit, a persuasion-immune Yankee.

As if.

MY WRISTWATCH ALARM goes off at 6 a.m. I normally use it to coax myself out of bed, but now I ignore it. I stare up at the ceiling, where the smoke detector blinks reassuringly. If the smoke alarm detected smoke, it would alarm, scaring the pajamas off the heaviest sleeper. If that isn’t emotional, I don’t know what is.

For the time being, the detector says nothing. But my cat does. She jumps on the bed and sticks her nose in my armpit. As reliable as my watch and twice as annoying, the cat persuades remarkably well for about 10 dumb pounds of fur. Instead of words, she uses ges-
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WHY

The kids’ fallacy is the Appeal to Popularity. Good for logic, bad for politics. “Children are starving” commits what I call the Wrong Ending Fallacy. It implies a result that doesn’t exist. (Eating more won’t help the children in Africa.) Ilogical doctors suffer from the Fallacy of Ignorance, which assumes that what we cannot prove must not exist. Finally, our “honest man” makes logic chase its tail with the Tautology, which supports a proposition by repeating it in different words.

Have you noticed that somewhere in here I switched from the past tense to the present? That’s because I want you to feel like you’re experiencing, right now, what I did two years ago.

Five minutes later I’m bickering with my son, George. Not a good start to my day of emotion-free argument, but I’ll chalk it up to what scientists call an “artifact” (translation: boneheaded mistake) and move on. I make coffee, grab a pen, and begin writing ostentatiously in a notebook. This does little good in the literary sense—I can barely read my own scribble before coffee—but it produces wonderful results; when my wife sees me writing, she often brings me breakfast. Did I just violate my own experiment? Shielding the notebook from view, I write a grocery list. There. That counts as writing.

Dorothy Senior, who had stayed home to raise the kids, returned to full-time work after I quit my job. The deal was that I would take over the cooking, but she loves to see her husband as the inspired author and herself as the capable enabler. Of course, she might be persuading me; by doing more than her share around the house, she makes me feel guilty enough to work more than I would otherwise. Whatever is going on here, it’s clearly consensual.

THIS, TO TAKE a short break from my doomed experiment, leads us to argument’s grand prize: the consensus. That means more than just an agreement, much more than a compromise. The consensus represents an audience’s commonsense thinking. In fact, it is a common sense, a shared faith in a choice—the decision or action you want. But even Aristotle, that logical old philosopher, knew that logic alone wouldn’t achieve the kind of consensus you look for at home or in the office. Logic just isn’t a sufficient motivator.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for a logical world. Bad logic wastes our time, ruins our health, and breaks our budgets. Children use it to torture their parents (“All the other kids get to”). It makes kids overeat (“Eat all of it; children are starving in Africa”). Doctors misdiagnose patients with it (“The tests came back negative. There’s nothing wrong with you”). Politicians base their campaigns on it (“You can trust me because I’m an honest man”). These are no mere logical punctilios. We’re talking credit lines and waistlines, life and death, the future of human existence! Excuse the hyperbole—which, by the way, is not necessarily illogical, despite what you learned in school or on Star Trek.

My own education in logic before college consisted entirely of Mr. Spock. He led me to believe that anything
tainted by emotion was “illogical,” and that my status as an earthling got me off the hook. Vulcans could be logical; the rest of us were hopeless. This was fine with me because his kind of logic was a one-man date repellant. Besides, what counts as a fallacy in formal logic works well in day-to-day argument. A child who says, “All the other kids get to,” is really saying, “You don’t want to turn me into a social outcast, do you?” It’s a guilt trip, but a legitimate one. Your best answer is not, “That’s a fallacy, dear.” That’s almost as annoying as saying, “Name 60 percent of your friends who get to, and I’ll count that as all of them.” So much for Mr. Spock.

Think about the ways you try to persuade your spouse (“We can too afford a cruise”), a friend (“Give me the car keys; you’ve been drinking”), a colleague or client (“My strategy will work better”), or a child (“You’ll love dance lessons”). Logic plays a role in each discussion. But to get your audience to do what you want, it has to desire the act. And desire requires emotion.

MEANWHILE, MY experiment gets more dubious by breakfast. Dorothy puts a plate of eggs on the table, shrugs into her suit jacket, and kisses me goodbye. “Don’t forget,” she says, “I’ll be home late.” She leaves for her fund-raising job at a law school. (Fund-raising and law. Could it get any more rhetorical?) I turn to George. “So, want to have dinner with me or on campus tonight?” George attends a boarding school as a day student. He hates the food there.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’ll call you from school.” I want to work late and don’t feel like cooking, but I’m loath to have George think my work takes priority over him. Ignoring my vow of emotional abstinence, I say, “OK, we’ll have stew!”

“Ugh,” he says, right on cue. He hates my stew even more than school food. The odds of my cooking tonight immediately plummet.

And so goes my day. In my cabin office, I e-mail editors with flattering explanations for missing their deadlines (“I’m just trying to live up to your high standards”). That afternoon, George calls to say he plans to eat at school (Yes!). I work late, rewarding myself now and then with computer pinball. I find game breaks help me sit still for longer stretches.

Is this self-imposed emotional persuasion? I suppose it is. We can declare my experiment a complete disaster. And an undeniably happy one.

Jay Heinrichs is the editorial director of this magazine and the author of Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln, and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion (Three Rivers Press). He tests out emotional arguments on his fellow New Hampshirites. Sometimes they work.